

[Gray Eagle]

Roaldus Richmond OCT 14 1940 GRAY EAGLE He had his eyes and face the look of a eagle, and now his hair was gray. He had been one of the greatest athletes ever developed in town, and he had never really grown up. At forty-five he was still a big overgrown boy. He was always sparring or rough-housing, exchanging grips of strength, twisting wrists, and slamming some unsuspecting victim on the back. Standing six-feet tall and weighing two-hundred, he was still quick-moving and fast.

"How about some insurance?" he would say. "Want to buy that insurance today? No? — well I don't blame you. Everyone I sell a policy to either dies, gets hurt or falls sick right away. Say, you should've seen that game I handled Saturday. This Romanivich is one of the finest punters I've seen in a long time. Cool back there, and when he kicks 'em — wham! — sixty, sixty-five yards. Only a sophomore too. You want to watch that boy."

Dunkirk was an insurance agent and a good one. On Saturdays in the fall he refereed high school and college football games. He was happiest on those Saturdays. A natural official, student and lover of the game, he dominated the field.

He was married and had two sons. His wife led a quiet life, devoting herself to home and children and social circles, a placid existence far removed from the rollicking rounds pursued by her husband. "Say, I saw my boy play his first game the other day," Dunkirk said. "Only fifteen but he's big — a hundred-and-fifty now. He's got a lot to learn but he'll be all right. They call him Young Kirk. He was playing against boys seventeen or eighteen years old. You know I never got such a thrill in my life. I wouldn't have believed it. You can't understand it until you see a kid of your own in there, honest to God. After that game I was weak, limp as a rag. Tired as if I'd been in there myself. What a feeling!"

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Dunkirk's office was anything but pretentious. Obviously his business contacts were all outside. The office was a refuge, a place to work in private and perhaps have a few friends up for cards or drinks. The open roll-top desk revealed a mass of papers and envelopes stacked sheaf on sheaf. A flat-top desk bore many heel-prints, cigarette-scars, several ashtrays overflowing with butts, and a litter of old newspapers and magazines. A set of Indian clubs leaned in one corner, a cuspidor occupied the other. The adjacent closet held a small collection of empty ale and whisky bottles, a picture in a shattered frame, a discarded overcoat and hat, and sundry other articles. The windows, opening on a parking lot, were unwashed and sooty. The back roof was scattered with corn and grain where Dunkirk fed the pigeons.

"Sure miss my old cat Dempsey," he said. "Demps was a great old boy, and what a scrapper! He liked the ladies too, I guess. But he was getting old, I figure he crawled off and 3 died somewhere. They say cats do like that. I should've had a policy on him. I do miss him though. Say, you ought to have seen how that cat hated to see me drinking. If he saw me take a drink he'd come over and cuff my legs with his paw. He had a wicked left hook too, and some real claws on him. Yeah, we've had some parties in this office. Guess you could tell, looking at it. Lots of days we've gone without eating a thing but Dempsey always got his. Good food too, liver, humburg, steak scraps. I don't know where he came from just showed up here one day. Stayed six or eight years and then went off the same way. He must be dead or he'd come back. Dempsey liked it here. Not much like my wife — she won't even come into the place. Can't blame her, but hell, it's good enough for what I want.

"That's my dad's picture up there. He was bigger than any of us boys and we're all big enough. He was a giant, a great man in this state too. Started with nothing, a lumberjack out in the wilderness. Studied law, came here, and when he died he owned half of this Main Street and plenty of other things. A two-fisted old Scotchman, a fighter, and an honest lawyer — if you can imagine such a thing. I can't today, but Dad was. You ask

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anybody about Judge Dunkirk. He was a square-shooter, he never played along with the big-money boys. In fact he fought 'em like hell. He took the little guy's side every time because he was a big man all the way.

"Dad said once: 'I've got three big husky boys home. There's Gray, he can take a football and run a hundred yards with it 4 right through eleven other men. There's Joe, and he can kick a ball sixty-seventy yards on the fly. And Kirk, he can do about anything on the field. But when the woodbox has to be filled I have to fill it!'"

"He had a lot more stuff than any of us got, that's a cinch. I guess he was disappointed in us boys and he had a right to be. He sent us all to prep school and college — he did get a kick out of our ball-playing all right. He was satisfied with us in that respect. There's a picture of us when we were kids. Five little angel faces in a row, huh? And we turned out to be a bunch of gorillas. Two others are in the insurance business, one's a lawyer and one a dentist. We all went to different colleges. Dad said one school wasn't big enough for any two of us. Sure, we used to fight — and we still do. One night up here Gray and I were battling. Gray's a lot bigger than I am, and strong! — he's got arms and legs like tree trunks, and he's faster'n hell besides. He always licks me. When we get tight together we always fight and I always take a beating. This night we wrecked the place and the cops came up to stop it. We stopped fighting, threw the cops downstairs, and went right back to slugging again! We got away with a lot around here on account of Dad. But lots of people, including the cops, hate our guts. They never dared to much about it though.

"Sure, Gray was an All-American at Cornell and he played pro football, big league football. Five hundred bucks a game, three or four games a week, Jesus Christ! It ruined him though. He never could adjust himself to living on a normal salary. 5 He got used to blowing money and he never got over it. I think he's a little punch-drunk too. From the awful drubbings he took in the pro game. Great guy though, heart as big as all outdoors. Never starts trouble but when it starts — look out!

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"Dartmouth was my school. There's a picture of my freshman team, Bill Cunningham's year. That's Bill right there... Has he got the job now, and can he write sports! Left Dartmouth to join the navy, I did, I mean. I was in the navy two years and never stepped on board a warship. Kept me on this side to drill recruits. Same thing happened to Gray in the marines, and later his whole damn regiment was almost wiped out at Belleau Wood. I was at Newport, Charlestown, Portsmouth. Then after the war I went into the Naval Air Corps and was down in Pensacola. While I was in the Service I played ball with a lot of big leaguers — Tris Speaker, Wall Pipp and that gang.

"I almost got mine down in Pensacola when I got caught in a typhoon. I flew with it and it carried me out to sea, forcing me down, down, down, Christ, I was scared, didn't know what to do. Then I saw the waves under me, close, breaking white. I turned and the goddamn wingtip must've almost hit the water. As soon as I got headed into the wind I started rising, the wind pressure on the wings lifting me, see? But I sure lost my head for awhile, Mister. You know what I thought of? I thought of our backyard at home, the ashpile we used to play on, the green hill behind the house. And I knew I was never going to see them again. Lucky, lucky for me — and unlucky for my wife and the rest of the world, I guess!" The fine gray head went back as Dunkirk's booming laugh jarred through 6 the room.

"I never joined the Legion, never wanted to. I don't believe in it, it's nothing but a political organization. They've had Legion Commanders right here that were caught in the last draft, only in uniform two weeks. Slackers in war-time, big heroes in peace-time. To hell with that stuff, Mister. I was home on leave and one of them, who later became Head of the Legion, says: 'Is the navy safe? Is it a safe to be, in the navy?' I told him hell, it was safer there than at home, especially unpopular as he was around here. Ten days later he showed up at camp. Now he's a big Legionnaire hero." Dunkirk coughed and spat at the cuspidor, his strong ruddy face registering disgust.

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"I was married in the Service. I lived in Boston, Hartford and Springfield awhile before coming back home. I've been here since except for trips to football games, company conventions, fishing trips to Maine, and things like that. Last time we went to Maine five of us took twenty-five quarts of Haig & Haig, and we only stayed a few days.

"My father died seven years ago. They still talk about him a lot around here. What a great man he was and what washouts his sons are, you know. Mother's still living but she isn't very well. She's a real fine cultured lady — I don't know where she got such roughnecks for sons, honestly. Big hard-drinking bruisers. Dad drank a lot but it never got him down or interfered with his work; he could take it. My wife's more like Mother. I guess they both get disgusted with me." 7 It was there in Dunkirk's rugged face, the hawk-nose and brown eagle-eyes, that undying wildness that was in him. And you thought surely he was a strange man to be an Insurance agent.

"That's a battle too — selling insurance," he said, as if he had read your thought. "You've got to keep fighting all the time. You've got to drive yourself, build it up little by little, make new contacts all the time." He shook his handsome gray head. "I've slipped a lot in the last few years and I know it. I used to make about five or six thousand a year, but I let up, stopped driving, lost my grip. I know I could still make fifty or sixty dollars week anyway — if I'd work. But I waste so much time, so goddamn much time. Stop in some beer garden for one ale and get to talking football or baseball, or prize-fighting or the war in Europe, and stay right there drinking ale and talking. You know how it is. Or if I work like hell for two weeks I get bored and dull, want some fun and excitement. Well, after the football season I'll settle down and really grind."

Dunkirk was a great talker. He knew everybody in the state, and for everyone he had some new and intimate approach to conversation. Something [snatched?] from the past or promised in the future, to make them feel that he'd been waiting particularly to see them.

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Ruthless and powerful he was naturally much hated and feared, yet there were many who liked him deeply. He had an absolute disregard for conventions and public opinion — and sometimes for all human feelings. He had a deep-rooted faith in himself and his own strength and abilities.

“Yes, we sell to stonecutters,” he said. “But they have to pay and pay well. Lots of them can't pass the physical examination anyway. The poor bastards, I feel sorry for them. I've sold a good many policies to stonecutters. I paid off a five-thousand dollar policy to a stonecutter just last week. He was a hard one to sell too, didn't want to talk about it at all. Never would've taken it if it hadn't been for his wife. Big family too, God, I don't know. That'll help them some — but what's five thousand with a family like that? All those kids. It's a hell of a thing all right. I wish it had been fifty thousand I was giving her. I told her so and I meant it.

“People think I'm a heartless brute, you know. I know it and I don't give a damn. But I do like to help people, if I can. Last Christmas I met this little guy in a beer joint, crying in his beer almost. Said he was going to commit suicide. His wife was sick, he had no job, no money, nothing. And it was Christmas. Well, I felt sorry for him. I bought him a bottle of wine to take to his wife and some whisky for himself. I got him a turkey and all the fixings and sent him home with it. And I let him take ten bucks too. Well, it made me feel pretty good. I guess I felt like Santa Claus or something. First of the year I got him a job; or helped to. He's still working and getting by all right now. But he doesn't come around any more, and he never paid me the ten. Well, what the hell, I still feel pretty good about the whole thing.

“Did I tell you I saw my oldest boy play his first game? 9 And I got the thrill of my life-time out of it. Yes, the high school always has good teams, football and everything else. These foreign kids make fine athletes. They're strong and tough and quick, naturals most of them. Of course we got a lot of them on account of the granite industry — Italians, Scotch, Irish, French — Swedes and Spaniards too. The Italians make good ball players,

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of course, plenty of fire and fight coupled with natural strength and ability. Look at the Wops in the big leagues, full of then as you know. We can probably thank granite for our athletic supremacy, I suppose, along with everything else. The boys rank with the best in the state practically every year.

“Say, how about that insurance now, want to take out some more? What, you don't want it? Well, well, well.” Dunkirk shook his great gray head with mock sadness, sprang up with amazing speed, shadow-boxed around the room for a minute, and then halted and laughed his heavy laugh. “Well then, Mister,” he said. “How about a glass of ale?”